MontanaLawHelp.org Guide to Content Development

Revised 22 October 2003 by Katherine Bladow[*]

MontanaLawHelp.org provides general legal information to low- and moderate-income Montana residents. The Web site focuses on providing information about the following areas of law:

- Consumer
- Disability
- Employment

- Family
- Health
- Housing

- American Indian
- Public Benefits
- Seniors

A person responsible for one of these areas has asked you to develop a specific piece of content for MontanaLawHelp.org. Thank you for agreeing to share your experience and knowledge.

We understand that developing online, client-focused legal information is not easy. We have created the MontanaLawHelp.org Guide to Content Development to make the process easier.

When you develop a piece of content for MontanaLawHelp.org, you should strive to make your piece accurate, complete, state specific, appropriate for posting online, readable, and accessible.

Accurate

Content on MontanaLawHelp.org must be legally accurate. Any content that is inaccurate or misleading will not be posted on MontanaLawHelp.org.

Complete

Content on MontanaLawHelp.org must be thorough and useful. The content should provide all of the necessary information; however, the content does not need to cover the topic exhaustively. Give the reader enough information so that they are well-informed and able to make steps toward solving their problems, but don't overwhelm them with unnecessary information.

State Specific

MontanaLawHelp.org was developed to provide state specific information; therefore, all content created for MontanaLawHelp.org should discuss the law as it pertains to Montana.

Appropriate for Posting Online

Studies have shown that people don't use online content in the same way that they use printed materials. When using online content, most people scan for important information. Content needs to be developed, so that people can easily scan it.

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[*] You can find the current version of this document at www.MontanaProBono.net.

Good online content has several key characteristics:

- A paragraph contains only one idea.
- Headings signal main ideas.
- Instructions are listed using numerals or bullets with only one instruction listed per numeral or bullet.
- The content is 50% shorter than the corresponding printed material.
- The content should not use terms that refer only to printed materials, such as chapter or previous page.

One reliable way to construct good content is to use a Question and Answer format.

Also, online content should have a revised date and contact information listed at the bottom. You may list either your own contact information or the contact information for the Montana Legal Services Association. Please use the following format:

Revised Month/Year

Name
Address
City, State Zip Code
Telephone Number
Toll Free Telephone Number

Please use the following contact information for the Montana Legal Services Association:

Montana Legal Services Association
616 Helena Avenue, Suite 100
Helena, Montana 59601
(406) 442-9830
(800) 666-6124
Western Montana Hotline: (800) 666-6899 or (800) 926-3144
Eastern Montana Hotline: (800) 999-4941

Readable
The average American reads comfortably at a 5th grade level. It is important that the content posted on MontanaLawHelp.org can be read and understood by the average American, so all content must be written for a 5th grade reading level. The following guidelines will help you produce content with an appropriate reading level:

- Write in the second person (i.e. you).
- Use simple or compound sentence structures.
- Avoid clauses and appositives.
- Avoid using words with three or more syllables.
- Minimize the number of sentences with more than ten words.
- Keep paragraphs short.

- Avoid content longer than three typed pages.
- List directions vertically with one direction per line.
- Use common contractions.
- Avoid using pronouns where they could lead to confusion.
- Do not use multiple adjectives before a noun.
- Avoid legal jargon. Where a legal term is necessary, define the term simply in the content.
- Use the bold and italic formats sparingly.
- Follow all grammar rules.

The following examples demonstrate how paragraphs can be revised to be more readable.

Example 1

Original Paragraph
Be firm but cordial in telling the landlord that locking a tenant out of the premises, without a court order, is improper and violates Montana's landlord and tenant laws.

Revised Paragraph
Talk to your landlord. Be firm but polite. Tell your landlord that you can't be locked out of your apartment without a court order.

Example 2

Original Paragraph
You may be evicted with not less than *fourteen* (14) days notice if you do not comply with the terms of your rental agreement; if you do not keep your rental unit clean and safe; if you do not allow your landlord access to the rental unit; if you remove a lock without receiving permission; or, if you replace or add a lock and either don't ask for permission in writing or don't give your landlord a key.

Revised Paragraph
You can be evicted if:

- you don't follow your rental agreement
- you don't keep your rental unit clean and safe
- you don't let your landlord into the rental unit
- you remove a lock without your landlord's permission
- you add or replace a lock without your landlord's permission
- you add or replace a lock, and you don't give your landlord a key

Your landlord must give you at least 14 days notice before he evicts you.

You can check the readability of content using either the tools available in Microsoft Word and Corel WordPerfect. To use the tools available in Microsoft Word, visit Tools >

Spelling and Grammar. To use the tools available in Corel WordPerfect, visit Tools > Grammatik > Options > Analysis > Readability.

You may also use the following method[**]:

1. Select three sections of text that contain approximately one hundred words. One section should be from the beginning, one from the middle, and one from the end.

   For each section of text:
2. Count the number of words.
3. Count the number of sentences.
4. Divide the number of words by the number of sentences. The result is the average length of a sentence.
5. Count the number of words that have three or more syllables. Do not include capitalized words, compound words, or verbs that become three syllables when conjugated.
6. Add the result of Step 4 to the result of Step 5.
7. Multiply the result of Step 6 by 0.4. The resulting number approximates the reading level for that section of text.

   To approximate the reading level of the entire document:
8. Average the reading levels for all three sections.

Warning: Any method of finding a reading level that uses a formula is limited to checking the average length of the sentences and the number of syllables in the words. These methods should only be used as a guide. They do not always produce an accurate reading level and should never be used as guide for ascertaining how well-written or how understandable content is.

Accessible

Everyone does not use a computer in the same manner. People with disabilities often need additional software and hardware in order to use the Internet. Online content needs to be designed to maximize the accessibility for people with disabilities. While the MontanaLawHelp.org templates have been designed for use by people with disabilities, there are a few things you can do to make your content more accessible.

- **Tables** Use tables only where absolutely necessary. Although they are an important information organization tool, tables can add to the complexity of a Web page. Never use a table set inside of another table.
- **Extra Characters** Avoid using unnecessary characters. Never use a dash (-) where a comma will suffice, and never use two dashes (--) where one dash (-) will suffice. Avoid using more parentheses and brackets than necessary.

[**]Source:
Assessing the Readability of Printed Materials
Gunning Fox Index Worksheet, Summarized from The University of Michigan,
School of Public Health, 4/95

- **Images**   Always include a written description of any images that you include in your content. The description can be brief, such as "The following illustration shows the process for filing court documents."

Style Guidelines

If you have specific style questions, refer to the Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications. This manual is available in electronic format for free from the Microsoft Web page (http://www.microsoft.com) or from the MontanaLawHelp.org Web Content Coordinator (www.MontanaProBono.net) or montanalawhelp@mtlsa.org).

Again, thank you for agreeing to develop content for MontanaLawHelp.org. Once you have finished developing your piece of content, please return an electronic copy to the person who asked you to develop the content. The content will be reviewed and the either posted on MontanaLawHelp.org or returned to you for revision.